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Sutton's Rule for Writing Centers

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Working with assholes

On many days, writing centers are wonderlands of collaborative discovery and rich reading and writing of texts.[1] Occasionally, however, the scene is different: Demanding students "tutor hop" for paper fixing rather than learning, inflexible faculty assign the same irrelevant paper 25 years in a row and wonder why tutors don't keep students from plagiarizing, and the very dean we need to "get it" continues to ask for a report that no one will read. Occasionally, even writing center directors are pretty tough to deal with.

Most writing centers can point to examples of people whose behavior goes far beyond "misunderstanding" the writing center's mission and purpose–people who act like downright jerks. In fact, typical writing center training anticipates these events by preparing staff to handle difficult people well. Directors, tutors, and other staff are inventive as they try to explain tutoring, redirect frustration, and assuage anger; they remain calm–and sometimes they cave in. At times, though, our generous gestures cross a dangerous line when we rationalize other people's behavior and set precedents for putting up with whatever they dish out. Sometimes our well-intentioned peer tutors–who were attracted to their jobs in the first place because they enjoy helping people–are suddenly put in positions where helping people means taking abuse.

Rather than gleefully labeling others' behavior so that they can be derided and dismissed, [Sutton] challenges us to look carefully at people–including ourselves–in ways that confront problems directly and productively.

When the shared lightbulb moments, warm fuzzies, and Facebook friendships turn into stinking socks and zinging comebacks, many of us ask our writing center tutors, writing assistants, consultants, and staff to engage in reflective practice as part of our ongoing staff development efforts. In some writing centers, this takes the form of discussions in meetings. In others, writing assistants are invited to produce written reflections after each session or to contribute to weekly blogs, posting about their work. When we listen carefully to these discussions and examine closely what the people on the "front lines" of writing center work write about, one thing becomes clear: We have to do more than hope the socks and zingers will go away; we have to recognize behaviors that are unacceptable and learn to deal with them. We have to find ways to discuss these encounters with "beyond-difficult people" and become more confident about our methods of interaction with them.

In an effort to look for answers from sources beyond writing center literature, we became intrigued by the work of Robert Sutton, Professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University, and his 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article on contending with assholes in the workplace (yes, he really used that word, and HBR really published it) and later a book titled *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*.**[2]** Sutton takes a direct approach, making the case that bland terms like "difficult people" are not authentic, often helping us make excuses for what he believes is more properly called asshole behavior, and we see many applications of his work for writing centers and their complex issues of authority and cooperation. Sutton focuses on practical ways to identify the behavior of these "way-beyond-difficult" people. He gives ways to avoid both the persons and their behaviors, techniques for diffusing unavoidable behaviors, and encouragement for "outing" such behaviors rather than making excuses for them. He even advocates the extreme move of treating such persons as incompetent in order to disarm them of their power.

Sutton is careful to make the point that we all have the potential to go beyond difficult, even approaching his designation of asshole at times. However, his subtitle, "Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't," points to his emphasis on constructive moves. Rather than gleefully labeling others' behavior so that they can be derided and dismissed, he challenges us to look carefully at people–including ourselves–in ways that confront problems directly and productively.

Sutton goes to great lengths to describe the mythical and often subjective concept of assholes. In his research, he points out the importance of not only identifying these behaviors but also understanding why they are so harmful: "Assholes have devastating cumulative effects partly because nasty interactions have a far bigger impact on our moods than positive interactions–five times the punch, according to recent research" (30).

Often we figure that someone is having a bad day or a bad moment, or simply is tired and stressed. However, it is this type of rationalization that gets us into trouble.

In writing centers, these persons and their behaviors take many shapes and forms. They could be superiors, peers, or subordinates–faculty, staff, or students. Because negative interactions with them can have devastating effects on entire workplaces, we need to manage these moments and adjust our expectations. This means focusing on changing little things that we and our colleagues have some control over and continuing to model appropriate responses. Social learning strategies offer powerful motivators for behavioral change. Sutton advises:

> [Do not] expect that the jerks will change their behavior. Keep your expectations for their behavior low, but continue to believe that you will be fine after the ordeal is over. That way, you won't be surprised or upset by your colleagues' relentless nastiness. And if they do show you unexpected moments of kindness, you can enjoy the pleasant surprise without suffering disappointment when they return to their wicked ways. (134)

This also means to stop rationalizing the behavior of assholes. Often we figure that someone is having a bad day or a bad moment, or simply is tired and

stressed. However, it is this type of rationalization that gets us into trouble. When we make excuses for these behaviors, we are validating unacceptable actions and encouraging them to continue. Especially in academic arenas, this can be hard to avoid because we want to facilitate learning and encourage not only students but also our own colleagues to continue to grow; however, Sutton encourages us to see that the challenges associated with this process are not an excuse for intolerable behavior. So how does a writing center manage these inevitable conflicts?

What it comes down to is modeling and teaching constructive confrontation. Sutton notes: "When the time is ripe to battle over ideas, follow Karl Weick's advice: fight as if you are right; listen as if you are wrong" (90). This could mean developing work environments where people know when it is okay to react, engage, or shut someone down as well as when it's time to stop and listen.

Identifying and Acting/Labeling and Learning

Although Sutton's book focuses on how assholes operate in many workplaces, his thinking was triggered by an incident in an academic setting involving a very accomplished faculty member who would not abandon his asshole ways. Thus we use his work to notice the range of ways such persons and their behaviors can impact writing centers, from students, to tutors, to the faculty with whom we interact. Our purpose, like Sutton's, is not simply to hone our labeling skills. Rather we hope to distinguish between persistent asshole behaviors and those that mark someone simply having a bad day. In addition, particularly because we operate in teaching/learning settings, we want to keep in mind three things. First, many writing centers pride themselves on protecting students from the harsh realities of any impersonal academic personality or institution; instead, we should empower students to understand that they can respond as humans in these tough spots. Second, it's easy to write off or face off with instructors or deans or students who do not "get" our work. We are proposing that people we are inclined to dismiss as assholes don't necessarily deserve the label; rather they deserve our investment in their learning many of the things others have been patient enough to teach us. And third, student tutors are more than employees, and our relationships with them should be anchored in learning. Thus, rather than conveniently labeling and firing even the most flagrant-appearing assholes, we need to try to understand their contexts and link them with the resources that can help them grow as students and as professionals, even though in some cases this may include separating them from writing center work.

And thus we turn to Sutton's first step: recognizing and naming asshole behaviors. He proposes twelve ways of recognizing these persons and their behaviors:

"The Dirty Dozen:" Common Everyday Actions that Assholes Use

1. Personal Insults
2. Invading one's "personal territory"
3. Uninvited physical contact
4. Threats and intimidation, both verbal and nonverbal
5. Sarcastic jokes and teasing used as insult delivery systems
6. Withering e-mail flames
7. Status slaps intended to humiliate their victims
8. Public shaming or "status degradation" rituals
9. Rude interruptions
10. Two-faced attacks
11. Dirty looks
12. Treating people as if they are invisible (10)

Let's say we have a conception of our writing center as a place that promotes zero tolerance of assholes or assholeness, which is consistent with the prevailing commitment to writing centers as communities. However, communities are groups of people, differently situated people, who may legitimately exhibit some of the behaviors Sutton lists. For example, anxious students overwhelmed by frustrating interactions with instructors may be sarcastic or may invade a tutor's personal territory when they can't get what they've been told they should get from our writing centers. They may push back hard when tutors announce that they won't/can't do students' editing for them when their instructors have almost ordered them to "get your paper edited by the writing center." In turn, directors and tutors are likely to find these instructors difficult to like or respect because of their attitudes toward student writers, student writing, and the writing center itself, particularly when we feel we have to absorb a spectrum of their behaviors, from insensitive feedback on papers, to curt emails, to irate phone calls to the writing center. We cannot be so naÃ¯ve as to believe that our only productive interaction in a writing center is with student writers. Sutton argues it is very possible that Assholes-R-Us when we fail to look closely at the people in charge at our institutions, and more specifically, at the people who have some direct power over our students.

Take a look at the email below, which includes remarks from a faculty member to a writing center director.

> "I'm currently involved in a long 'discussion' with a professor here who recently wrote me the following note: 'I feel that no work submitted for a

> grade should ever be even perused by someone who has the intent of teaching students how to write even if the instruction is very indirect… help should be ruled out if it is for a grade.'"

What is your initial reaction? Some of us would mutter under our breath and count to ten, for reading responses that counter the basic principles of our work is a common frustration for writing center directors. It is challenging to determine whether others just "don't get it" or whether their agendas are set so firmly that their drive to maintain power overrides learning anything new about students and writing. Can we figure out how to reach and teach administrators threatened by budget cuts and assessment demands? Can we design paths to negotiate with overworked instructors who may feel overwhelmed by what they know to see only as defective students? Can we provide students with language they might use to deal with these dictates from instructors?

As writing center administrators and tutors, we exercise significant control over others, and it can be all too easy to allow this hierarchy to excuse what we might label asshole behavior in others.

While we believe much of our work can reshape intolerable behaviors as we come to better understandings of our work and theirs, we also believe that a writing center is an environment that offers the opportunity for our student tutors and our student writers to find out that "nice" matters. Some students are buffaloed by the brusque professor, scared of the system, unable to navigate the rough waters of connection with those who are less willing to meet them halfway. The instructors who naturally figure more importantly to students–vis-Ã -vis grades and other judgments–will influence the ways students use or don't use a writing center. Recall: According to Sutton, in order for certified assholes to thrive, a power differential must exist, and many of the moves a particular type of instructor makes are driven by the need to maintain that power.

The overt caring that takes place in a writing center sends a counter-message about who and what matters. Researchers have found that "negative and unkind people were seen as less likeable but more intelligent, competent, and expert than those who expressed the same messages in kinder and gentler ways" (161). As our students travel through our institutions, they may very well observe that hierarchy matters more than good manners. Students may witness incidents in which aggressive or bullying behavior is associated with someone more intelligent, more experienced, more in control of the student's own future through the grades they give and the bureaucratic barricades they throw in their way. This witnessing alters their view of adults, and we believe we should share an honest assessment with students; in other words, we think it is okay to tell students this behavior is not okay. We can peel off the veneer, though they lose their innocence; we can empower students to take the high road, to meet with instructors who have determined to dismiss or denigrate; we can teach students to use their good manners to demand responsibility–get it, response-ability–from those who are paid to respond to their writing. Here Sutton's suggestions for diffusing asshole behavior and keeping it from spreading are useful:

Diffusing the Behavior of Assholes and Keeping it from Spreading
- Carefully screen job applicants
- Be willing to act quickly in addressing behavior
- Keep assholes out of power positions
- Treat assholes as incompetent employees
- Downplay unnecessary status differences
- Manage moments
- Model and teach constructive confrontation
- Don't wait too long to get rid of assholes who cannot change their behavior
- Link big policies to small decencies
- Ignore behavior that is outlandish (89-91)

Students' limited experience in the world of work puts them at a disadvantage and having more exposure to school-based values alters their perceptions of who and what matters most. But students are not alone in this: Think of your colleagues who lack the courage to respond to assholes because of the formulation Sutton lays out here:

> In most places being an asshole is a disadvantage, the nastiness and outbursts are seen as character flaws – but in some places this is tolerated when people are more talented, smarter, more difficult to replace, and endowed with a higher natural success rate than ordinary mortals. (55)

Sutton's work encourages us to make visible the power relations that determine how students make choices about their academic support; if others are bullying them, students need to know they have options, allies, and the ability to "just say no!" Here Sutton speaks particularly to directors when he charges us to "out" asshole behaviors, to show that they should not be tolerated and that people can resist successfully.

So Much Easier To Spot in Others!

To this point, we've focused on the bad behavior of others, but this does not mean that any of us, no matter how wise in composition theory or committed to community, is immune to becoming at least a "temporary asshole" if not a permanent one. As writing center administrators and tutors, we exercise significant control over others, and it can be all too easy to allow this hierarchy to excuse what we might label asshole behavior in others. And here, again, Sutton challenges us with his self-test. The two dozen questions, grouped into three categories, yield a picture of how abrasive or bullying our current

behavior might be. Adapting these three sections for writing center work can be tremendously useful, as they allow us to consider ourselves as others see us: not as always working selflessly with clients' or tutors' best interests at heart, but as fallible people working against deadlines, under constraints, and with the myriad unique concerns that occupy us daily.

Facing such challenges, it can be all too easy to forget to treat others well. To curtail this, in the first section, "What are your gut reactions to people?," Sutton suggests that we ask ourselves questions about how we interpret the actions of others. These questions point out how our perceptions of others greatly influence how we will act toward them. As we begin to devalue unprepared student writers, to joke about them in the tutor break rooms or administrators' offices, so does our future behavior become tilted toward serial sarcasm or harassment, if only subtly at first.

Treatment of Others
- You are quick to point out others' mistakes
- You don't make mistakes
- You find it useful to glare, insult, and yell
- Your jokes and teasing can get a bit nasty at times, but you find them funny (124-125)

Not coincidentally, Sutton's next section investigates how we treat others. Sutton argues that these actions are, at least in part, the carrying out of our perceptions of others. While tutors who yell at students likely would not be employed for long, more subtle forms of harassment, such as the excessive dwelling on minutiae, can escape notice in busy writing centers. Although most tutor training programs likely overemphasize a positive approach, tutors and administrators need to return occasionally to this topic and have honest discussions about recognizing excessive negativity.

Sutton's book is a useful study of how to deal with behavior that can poison a workplace […] Its utility for writing centers is to remind tutors and administrators that writing centers are not always the idealized safe spaces they are imagined to be.

The final section of Sutton's test asks questions about others' reactions to us. This is the karmic, "reap what you sow" section of the Asshole Test, a place where we can reflect on how our actions may prompt reactions in others. Most writing centers have some variety of client feedback in place for tutors, which is a useful and necessary way for tutors and administrators to learn about how clients are reacting to tutors (provided the response is anonymous). The regular monitoring and discussion of feedback helps administrators guide tutors whose behaviors may be giving rise to client complaints.

Others' Reactions to You
- People avoid eye contact with you
- People always seem very careful about what they say around you
- People respond to your e-mail with hostile reactions (125-126)

However, for administrators, it is not only difficult to score ourselves accurately with self tests like these, but also–because writing center directors have authority over hiring and firing–to receive honest feedback from tutors. Another way for administrators to tap into other peoples' feelings about us is 360Â° evaluations: surveys given anonymously to those who work around us. For tutors, this would include not only clients, but other tutors and directors as

well. For directors, this includes the tutors, co-directors or colleagues, and the director's supervisor. If correctly administered (which is admittedly challenging), comments from clients, other tutors, and administrators can have a powerful influence on making tutors aware of their affect on other people. One of the authors' recent participation in a 360Â° evaluation led to valuable meetings with tutors and administrative assistants and has greatly increased communications, hopefully helping to make more room for everyone involved to give honest feedback.

We close this article by noting that Sutton's self-diagnostic for harassing behavior doesn't establish a dichotomy (asshole/not an asshole), but rather a range of behaviors. A few positive answers to these questions do not necessarily indicate a problem. Most of us, if we're being honest, would admit that we have not only had these feelings, but also act on them on occasion. But it is the number of positive answers to these questions that matters. As they increase, Sutton says, these behaviors become increasingly prone to permanency. The most important message of the rule is that we appraise ourselves candidly and act on suspicious behaviors.

Sutton's book is a useful study of how to deal with behavior that can poison a workplace and turn away customers and employees. Its utility for writing centers is to remind tutors and administrators that writing centers are not always the idealized safe spaces they are imagined to be. The power relations that thrive in academe can sneak into writing centers, taking many forms. Use Sutton's "Points to Remember" to empower yourself, your peer tutors, and your student writers to talk openly about behavior that can erode the learning environments we work so hard to build.

Sutton's Points to Remember

1. A few demeaning creeps can overwhelm the warm feelings generated by hoards of civilized people.
2. Talking about the rule is nice, but following up on it is what really matters.
3. The rule lives – or dies – in the little moments.
4. Should you keep a few assholes around?
5. Enforcing the no asshole rule isn't just management's job.
6. Embarrassment and pride are powerful motivators
7. Assholes are us. [Anyone can be an asshole.] (180-186)

Notes

[1]Our thanks to the audience at the **National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing** where we originally presented on this book. Special thanks to Clint Gardner for joining us there with video clips highlighting our points in a humorous way.

[2]For more information about Robert I. Sutton, find online: **50 Lessons** and **Sutton's Blog**.

Work Cited

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